The Fourth Church Pulpit

TO BUILD A CHURCH

October 29, 1995

John M. Buchanan

My prayer to God for this church is that its heart may be like unto the heart of God himself ... oh, that this church may be bigger than any one creed, or sect, or class, or race, or color — may be so big that any human may feel at home here, may draw near to God here, and may be cheered here to bless his day with the very atmosphere of heaven. May it be the mission of this church to tell every man in unmistakable words how dear he is to God, and then to live those words in the magnanimity of its welcome, the warmth of its fellowship and the generosity of its devotion.

The Reverend James G. K. McClure
President of McCormick Theological Seminary
Service of Dedication of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
May 12, 1914

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
Matthew 16:13-20

"And on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."
Matthew 16:18 (NRSV)

In the spring of 1914 two distinguished and unique Chicago organizations opened the doors to their brand new facilities for the first time on the north side of the city.

Over the years since that spring 81 years ago, both of those institutions and their remarkable buildings have welcomed thousands upon thousands, indeed, millions of people, who came to participate in a unique corporate activity. United by loyalty and commitment, the people of Chicago and visitors from all over the world, have come to sit together and to be a unique community. They have eaten and drunk together; they have stood together and lifted their voices as one in song; they have shared in the experience of primal human emotion — exhilaration, occasionally joy, occasionally grief, patience, devotion. Both institutions have been characterized by a clear and unwavering commitment to tradition: very little has changed in either of them since 1914. And both have based their current vital activity on a strong hope for the future. Both are incurably optimistic. In the spring of 1914 the first worship service was held in the new Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, and the first baseball game was played at the new park at Clark and Addison, Wrigley Field.

I discovered that bit of information while preparing a sermon for the 75th anniversary of this building in 1989. The head of the Tribune Company was in the congregation that morning, and not long afterward I was invited to throw out the first ball at Wrigley Field on the 4th of July. It also might be noted that the Chicago Cubs not only won that game but also went on to win their division; the first, and indeed last, time anything like that has happened in many decades.

So today, in the autumn of 1995, 81 years later, we are rededicating the building of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, and wouldn't it have been remarkable? — had the fortunes of the Cubs been just a little different — tonight, this very night, might have been the seventh and final game of the World Series, played here, with the Cleveland Indians. That, of course, is either theological hope at its best — or wishful thinking. In any event, it's only a few months before spring training.

I have been thinking a lot about the past recently, looking back through the history of this church to its founding as a merger, after the Civil War, between two existing congregations, North Church and Westminster Church. That new congregation, named the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, restored a handsome church building, the new Fourth Presbyterian Church, at the corner of Grand and Wabash, installed new carpeting and a wonderful new organ. The renovated building was opened for worship on October 8, 1871. That very night a cow kicked over a lantern, the Chicago fire claimed much of the city, including the Fourth Presbyterian Church and the homes of all but five of its families. During the blaze an elder buried the communion chalice and plate for safekeeping along the lake shore. When he returned to recover them, he discovered that someone had been there first and the silver was gone. Later, they showed up on the doorstep of the church, returned apparently by the guilty person. And we use them still when we celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

I've been thinking back to the courageous decision to purchase a piece of property along Pine Street, before it was called Michigan Avenue, and before there was a bridge over the river, when the neighborhood was characterized by a tile manufacturing plant, broken-down rooming houses and, on the corner at Chestnut, M. Donaghue's Tavern, the North Shore Sample Room. I've been thinking about the vision of the leaders who made that decision and then retained the best architects in the land to build the grandest church west of New York.

And I've been thinking about that Sunday in May of 1914 when the minister and leaders of this congregation dedicated their new building and, as we are trying this morning, attempted to find words appropriate for so significant an occasion.

They had worship services and celebrations all week long and at the end of the week the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) began its annual meeting in the brand new building. I've thought about that a lot as we moved back into this building and began immediately to hold meetings and then welcomed 500 Tutoring youngsters, administered 3,700 flu shots, hosted Homecoming Dinners and tomorrow morning will welcome the first youngsters to our new Day Care Center, all before the work has been completed.

They were solemn and lengthy dedication celebrations in 1914, by the way. On Sunday at the dedication of the building there were a number of people on the chancel. Mr. Luther W. Bodman, President of the Board of Trustees said:

> "Standing in the center of a great city, ministering to so many, this church will never be closed and it will be a place for the tired, for the hungry of soul to enter and seek that meditation and consolation and comfort which perhaps no place, except a place like this can give help for their need."

My favorite was the brief speech delivered by the Chairman of the Building Committee, Thomas D. Jones. I expect Mr. Jones was a little nervous. This gothic church, located out on the edge of downtown, along an unpaved road at the lake shore was, by anybody's standard, a very ambitious enterprise. Some must have thought it foolish. And, it was very expensive. Mr. Jones was a businessman, and kept his eye on the bottom line. He said:

> "Whether the expenditure which has been made here shall prove justified, time alone can answer. And the answer will be in terms of the service, the lives lived here, and the spirit that shall go out from here and enter the life of the community."

The wordiest of the speakers was the President of McCormick Theological Seminary, James G. K. McClure, who delivered an address on Tuesday night. Mc Clure pulled out all the rhetorical stops and with great flourish expressed his prayer that the heart of the church would reflect the heart of God. And he did see a vision which in fact has drawn this church forward over the years; a vision of a big and inclusive church, not merely in terms of numbers, but in the expansiveness and inclusiveness of its love. Bigger than any one creed, class, race or color, a church which understood something of God's all-inclusive love and then actually tried to live out that love in the city.

The pastor, John Timothy Stone, who before long would succeed McClure as President of the Seminary, preached an evangelical sermon on Sunday, didn't pay much attention to the building until his prayer.

> "Almighty and eternal God," he prayed, "we ask that thy Holy Spirit may abide with us and teach us the things which pertain to Thee. O, may our sons and daughters and coming generations in this house bow before Thee, Sabbath after Sabbath. Consecrate this, thy house, as we dedicate it to Thee."

I thought about how each pastor and each generation has left a particular legacy, has added to the building of the church physically, spiritually, programmatically. I thought about how Harrison Ray Anderson combined a broad pastoral ministry and a prophetic presence in the city, organized parishes and young adult ministries which attracted and nurtured and then sent out into the world literally thousands of Presbyterian Christians and, in a remarkably courageous witness, opened the doors of this church to a congregation of Japanese Christians during World War II. Harrison Ray Anderson built Westminster House with our own Morrell Shoemaker as the architect.

I thought about Elam Davies, and how the power and integrity of his preaching compelled the attention of thousands of people at a time when the traditional institutions were losing credibility and authority in this culture and when the theological seminaries stopped teaching preaching as a relic of an irrelevant past. And how, as urban churches began to slip and decline, or close their doors and flee to the suburbs, Fourth Church under Elam Davies' leadership dug in and spread out and penetrated more deeply into the life of this community, initiating new projects to bring the love of God in Jesus Christ into practical confrontation with the realities of contemporary urban life: a Counseling Center, a Tutoring Program, a Center for Older Adults, a Social Service Center.

And as I thought about us — our watch, our turn to be the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, I thought of something very wise the great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once said:

> "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime. Therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history: therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore we are saved by love." [edited by Ursula Niebuhr, *Love and Justice,* 1951].

To build a church. It's a bigger job than anyone of us can accomplish in a lifetime. "On this rock I will build my church," Jesus said one day and the rock he meant was Peter, whose name means "rock"; or it may have been the rock of Peter's faith, or the rock of Peter's momentary theological insight into the true nature of Jesus... "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." We still argue about what the passage means. Some think it's Peter who is the Rock, and Peter receives the papacy and hands it down all the way to John Paul II. Protestants are inclined to think that if Jesus meant Peter, he didn't mean anybody after Peter, or maybe the rock is merely faith like Peter's.

The more important point, it seems to me, is the incredible idea that Jesus means to build a church at all: that believing in him and following him ends up in an institution with offices and a budget and big buildings and mission activities and bills to pay.

"What a pity," Annie Dillard wrote, "that so hard on the heels of Christ come the Christians." There has always been a significant gap between the way people have felt about Jesus and how they have felt about the church ... an affinity for the simplicity of Jesus — and an aversion to his church. There has always been the sense that the most radical of Christianity's ideas is not God, the Holy Spirit, or salvation, but church — that Jesus meant to have a church, that Jesus continue to build a church, and that somehow what you and I are about here today, or wherever we belong to the church, is part of His own building project.

In a recent book on the Apostles' Creed, Hans Kung says,

> "It may be a holy catholic church, but it is also a sinful church because it consists of fallible sinful people." [*Credo,* p.139]

The church has never been a bastion of ethical perfection or moral purity. It has been an organization of people who make mistakes, commit sins, hurt one another. What then, is the purpose?

The church is the people who are trying to follow Jesus and who know you can't do it alone, particularly in this complicated world of ours which at the same time seems utterly secular and utterly vulnerable to whatever new spirituality comes along.

Martin Marty thinks that the image of the New England meeting house is right for the church at its best. The "public church," he calls it, "not morally perfect, not a haven from the sinful world. Congregating," he says, "is an act which initiates actual participation in a public." [Wind and Lewis, *American Congregations,* p.152].

To build a church, here in this place, has meant from the beginning to participate in a public, the public life of the city, to be precise. And we're still at it, still building by reaching out and into the community in the name of our Lord.

Garrison Keillor has written a witty and affectionate portrait of a church in an essay he calls "Episcopal," a denomination he knew as a youngster growing up in a small fundamentalist congregation as:

> "The church in wing-tips, the church of scotch and soda ... tweed-clad couples in their early seventies who strode in like they'd just killed a fox that morning and knelt down, addressed the Lord, got the thing taken care of, and got up and went home to dine on beef."

When he went to New York City, Keillor walked into the Church of the Apostles — Episcopal.

"Imagine my surprise ... no suits. Nobody was well-dressed, a hundred souls on lower Ninth Avenue, no parking lot, in need of paint, showing water damage, but which managed to operate a soup kitchen that fed a thousand New Yorkers every day. Black faces, old people, exiles from the Midwest, the lame and halt, divorced ladies, gay couples, a real good anthology of the faith."

Keillor closes the essay with a prayer:

"Thanks for bringing me here. Thank you." ["Episcopal," in *We Are Still Married,* p. 203-204]

And so 81 years after it was built and dedicated, we have rebuilt it and re-dedicated it to the glory of God — and to the service of its people and its city — and, this most of all, to a continuing future, when another generation of Christians, men and women and children, will be the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago.

As we have worked hard to finish the job of building the church, and have had to adjust to the reality that it would not be completed for this occasion, we have, I think, learned again that building a church is never over. The task is never complete. We have built on the foundation of those who were here before us. Others will come after and continue to build.

In a short story by the late Raymond Carver called "Cathedral," two men are spending a rather difficult evening together trying to make conversation. They have just met and part of their problem is that one of them is blind. A television documentary about cathedrals leads to a conversation and the sighted man asks the blind man if he has seen a cathedral; does he know what a cathedral looks like? "No," the blind man says, "I don't. Tell me." The other man tries to put it into words — the soaring spires, the vaulted ceiling, the high stone walls, the flying buttresses. It doesn't work. The blind man doesn't get it, can't "see," a cathedral. Finally, he says "Draw a cathedral. I'll put my hand on top of yours and then I'll know what a cathedral is." [Raymond Carver, *Where I'm Coming From,* "Cathedral," p. 266]

That's what we have done. We have placed our hands on top of hands who have drawn and built before us. Other hands will be placed on top of ours. All of them rest on and follow the hand of the one who chose Peter as the rock on which to build a church, and who continues to build his church, generation after generation, today and tomorrow, to the end of the age. Amen.

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Lord of all, we thank you that in every age you have built your church, using men and women and children to be your people, to show your love. We thank you for the church — everywhere — holy, catholic, bound together by your Spirit. We thank you for the churches which nutured us, calling us to faith. And we thank you for this church today. Bless it. Strengthen it and lead it confidently into the future. Amen.